

# The moral compass: Which direction?

In her article in CRJ 16:4, **Beverley Griffiths** identified the need for a living code of ethics for the developing profession of Emergency Management. Here, she explores ethical theories, underlining the dilemma of choice

**T**he theory of ethics has been debated, researched and written about from the perspectives of many different disciplines, professions and organisations. We do not have space here to reflect on the historical developments of ethics theory but it is, nevertheless, worth noting a few of the traditional and different theories that have been identified as being useful in disaster and emergency management (EM).

Ethics are a complex area of philosophy that the Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2021) defines as: “A study of right and wrong, used not as singular code, but in both professional behaviour and work through decision-making actions.”

However, nothing is ever that simple.

For generations, philosophers have argued about the complexities of obligations, values, principles and choices. Simply put, this is how we decide the kind of people we are, and the things we do or don't do. As you read this article, the challenge for you is to reflect upon your own stance, to consider your values and moral choices in life and in the different phases and situations of EM. This internal reflection is necessary for building the profession so that it encompasses a wide and varied body of practitioners who serve the wider community.

In philosophy, there are three dominant, traditional systems of ethics: Consequentialism, or utilitarianism; deontology (duty); and virtue (values).

Utilitarianism or consequentialism are often seen as two parts. Consequentialism is based on the consequences of actions taken. Within this we have egoism, where actions are morally validated as having the greatest result for the individual; in other words, each person has the ultimate aim of ensuring their own welfare. Utilitarianism compels deliberation about the consequences of actions in order to ensure the best for the maximum number of people affected; it does, however, accept that bad things can occur.

Deontology (duty) means complying with rules, principles or duty that should be followed. Finally, unlike the other theories, virtue ethics revolve around the personal choice of values and traits to live a moral life and how these affect decisions and actions.

More recently, research warns against the use of traditional theories, suggesting that they lack resolution for today's diverse communities and technological advancements. For example, utilitarianism can undermine the welfare of marginalised people or communities, yet

these are precisely where the greatest resources may be required in terms of building resilience or support in emergency situations. Deontology involves the morality of an action based on a set of ethical rules; in other words, it can be described as duty-based ethics. However, this is dispassionate of humanity because it can exclude others and therefore presents a possible weakness were it to be adopted by an organisation involved in EM and response.

Virtue ethics are person rather than action-based, focusing on individual virtues, so they miss a wider community outlook. Virtue ethics are often prevalent within the codes of professional bodies, which focus on professional qualities, rather than those needed for doing the job.

Intriguingly, one researcher has noted that the common attributes align closely to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. While a useful consideration, it is one-sided, as virtue ethics, being internal to self, fail to recognise the external environment and pressures of actions and decisions. This fact should not be overlooked, because as important as it is for an emergency manager's professional self, EM professionals serve communities and, as such, external attributes towards others are crucial.

## Context-sensitive

All of this leads to the realisation that there is much more to ethics, which are more open ended than traditional silos. Ethics need to be more embodied into the complexity of daily practice, and this requires more context-sensitive deliberation and judgement.

Although the traditional theories have a place and should not be overlooked, both society and the world have changed, leading to a search for ethical theories that support today's individuals and society and the complexities that they face. An important paradigm shift in ethical theories is that of the social contract theory. We are moving from egocentric traditions towards those that are more community-centric, with the accepted belief of a compact between an individual and those who govern, offering more support for work in the field.

Another factor is the non-prescriptive Ethics of Care Framework, originally devised for the caring professions. This has four concepts designed for reflection, interdependence, relations, responsibility and context. The framework's ethos is built around a web of relationships, rather than being autonomous, as is the case in other

frameworks, and this allows for reflection on roles and responsibilities within official relationships.

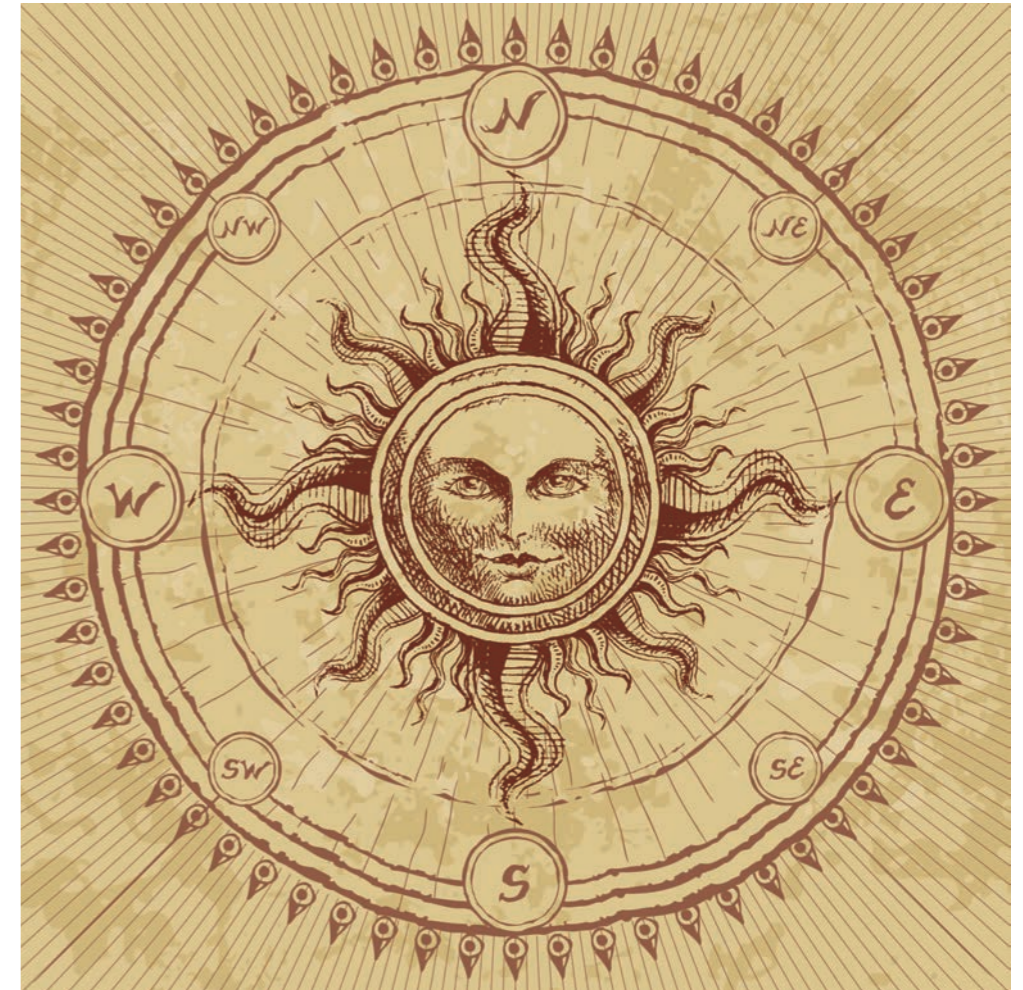
Last, we have environmental ethics, which have evolved to support a biocentric approach to the worth of the environment. These are very much in line with the understanding and consideration of the worth of the environment to human life, which is inbuilt into the definitions and scope of EM.

Previous work and traditional theories have been mainly philosophical in nature, not taking into account influencing factors such as individual behaviour or social environment. So, there also needs to be a realisation of behavioural ethics and how choice options, biases and environments affect ethical decision-making. Frighteningly, evidence informs us of ethical blindness, bounded awareness and unethical behaviour. Social and cognitive psychology indicates that individuals look for information that supports their own views, thus failing to see contradictions. This presents further challenges for ethical decision-making in EM. Encouraging an investigative mind-set supports everyday and unusual ethical dilemmas – these are situations, often complex and difficult, which question what is the right thing to do.

It is useful to understand the differences of the ethical theories, but work in disaster ethics has indicated the usefulness of utilising ethical pluralism. What is certainly agreed upon by those who have studied ethics in disaster management, is that there is a need to bring all the theories – both new and traditional – to bear on the complexities of disaster and, therefore, EM. In peacetime, the notion of utilising ethical pluralism, allowing the idea of many theories is fine; however, in times of urgency when there is little time for debate, ethical pluralism may not be the best way forward.

Allowing for the notion of many theories, even when they conflict with each other, is something that should be considered when developing an adaptable, flexible living code of ethics. Ethics should be openly debated, including their harmony and conflicting issues in understanding the complexity of the world and its challenges, using reliable methodology and research in reaching norms and values, crossing borders of country, professions, organisations, hierarchical levels and the moral imagination of individuals.

Finding a tangible, ethical identity before the process is critical to moving the field of ethics into the EM profession. This entails consideration of ethical identity at individual, organisation and multi-levels, as well as the ethical identities in society. These then need to be considered as to how they affect – whether positively or negatively – the development of a living



code, both for the individual professional and, more importantly, for the entire EM effort. Thus, the key issues of the relationship between those involved, be they individuals or multiple partners, and development of and endurance of the code, have to be reconciled.

This is explored further through the science of social cognition focus, in order to comprehend the way individuals cogitate regarding people and events, all amid the endless flood of information that is essential to adjusting to constantly fluctuating societal environments.

This second article in the series has moved the subject forward from my initial thoughts on the need for a living code of ethics. We have explored the ethical theories, old and new, with the dilemma of choice in the direction to guide our decision-making.

Next, I hope to look at ethical decision-making in emergency management, with further articles on: Moral distress; ethical codes components; management; and support for a code.

■ *A full list of references and further reading are available upon request, email [hello@crisis-response.com](mailto:hello@crisis-response.com)*

## Author



BEVERLEY GRIFFITHS is a Senior Lecturer in Emergency Planning at the UK's University of Wolverhampton, a CRJ Key Network Partner, and she is a Member of the CRJ's Advisory Panel

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